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Home

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A senior from Elliottville, Kentucky, I have been part of the Honors Program community since coming to the University of Kentucky.

I attended the Summer Environmental Writing Program (SEWP) in 2003. The College of Arts and Sciences awarded me a Dean's Scholarship for 2005-2006. I also had the opportunity to spend 5 weeks in Mexico this summer studying Spanish with the Kentucky Institute for International Studies.

Whether professionally or as a hobby, I plan to continue my writing. This story has been an amazing opportunity to try my hand at historical fiction. The link to family makes this piece even more special to me. Zoshia in the story is based on my great-grandmother and is the first story in a series documenting the progress of my family in the United States.

This project held the fascinating element of combining research gained through interviews with my maternal grandmother, online searches, and the creativity needed to fill in the gaps.

Working with my mentor, Jane Vance, was an incredible experience. The discussions between the two of us have helped guide my writing and take it in directions yet unexplored.

My interests include reading, writing, exploring the outdoors, time spent with family and friends, guitar, and martial arts.

This is a portion of a longer work that includes the story of Zoshia leaving her home and embarking on her voyage. The complete story is included in the on-line version of *Kaleidoscope* at www.uky.edu/kaleidoscope/fall2005.

Home

Thinking of her family was as painful as it was sweet. Zoshia hunkered in her allotted space and watched the families around her giving each other comfort. A father would cuddle his daughter to his chest when no amount of scolding would quiet her fear. A Mama would grow hungry as she gave the remainder of their food to the children and prayed that they would not grow sick in the dark confinement. There was even some laughter that was the physical expression of the hope that lay thickly even in the gloom. It was this hope that had led so many to leave what they knew behind, because there must be something better. Zoshia wanted her family around her; the backbone of strength she hadn't realized she rested on until she was alone. Though she learned to control and channel her fear as the days in steerage passed, her fright kept her apart from those around her. Fear of the unknown and longing for love gnawed at her belly as much as the hunger that inspired her hoarding of bread. Occasionally a kind soul would pull her from herself. A woman whose children had fallen asleep would look to her.

"Are you alright, child?" she would ask in the mother voice that woman earn as surely as their breasts swell with milk.

Zoshia never knew how to answer. She would say:

"I'm going to America." They would smile knowingly at her response, a gentle smile that allowed Zoshia to breathe easier and turned the



Mentor:

Jane Gentry Vance

Professor, Department of English and in the Honors Program

Amanda Doerrfeld's series of six stories is unique among the tens of creative projects I have supervised during my thirty years of teaching at the University of Kentucky. Each of her stories blends carefully researched facts with dramatization of crucial events in the history of her parents and her grandparents on both sides of her family. After interviewing them, she filled in the gaps by imagining the motives, conversations, and circumstances that are lost to memory, thus re-creating the narrative of their lives, from the experiences of her immigrant grandmother coming in steerage from Poland to America just before World War II, to the adventures of her activist father in the 1960's in a commune in Eastern Kentucky. Thus she makes real, as both good historians and good fiction-writers do, a prototypical American family drama. Writing about herself and her own very particular family, she tells us about ourselves and our families. Using the methods of creative nonfiction, Amanda imaginatively explores the roots of American life.

corners of her mouth toward the ship deck above, unconsciously.

"You're a good girl. You are by yourself, but you will make it."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"You're a pretty one and you must be smart or your family wouldn't have sent you on your own. They know they can trust you. That is what that means." Zoshia would nod and force the tears back. She was a Kielbasa and she wouldn't cry.

"You have family in America, honey?"

"Yes, Ma'am. My Aunt and Uncle." Zoshia had difficulty making her sentences more than a few clipped words. Talking to these women reminded her of Mama and she would choke. They seemed to understand and rarely asked for more. Zoshia would begin to relax into the warm words of another woman, a mother figure. She would lean against her trunk and the muscles in her stomach would begin to unclench. And then a sharp baby cry would break the solitude of the moment and Zoshia's Mama-figure would be gone, back to sooth her little ones. Zoshia would be alone again. Though she knew the painful cycle, she couldn't resist being drawn in when that soft voice reached to her, "Are you alright, child?"

One other event made Zoshia's half-trance travel more alive. The chance of fresh air when the boatmen would take small groups at a time up to the deck to stretch deadened bodies was short-lived, but heavenly. With a strong wind in her face and the blurry brightness of ocean and sky, Zoshia felt she had been transported to another world. She would raise her arms and let the wind take her clothing in hopes of being cleansed of the stench and the reality of the underworld she knew so well. Returning to captivity was horrible as she felt her body slump into the lethargic state that made such cramped conditions livable. The hopeful excursions to the surface were few and far between. When she settled again beside her trunk, Zoshia knew it would be some time before she felt the world around her again. She closed her eyes and tried to dream of home.

After an incalculable time in semidarkness, a murmur passed through the lower quarters that had no eyes or ears to the outside world; land had been spotted. There was an uprising of movement and conversation that had died down almost immediately after sailing. Zoshia awoke from her half-slumber and stretched, automatically checking her belongings around her. The bread supply had dwindled and for this reason, if none other, she hoped the rumors were true. An adolescent boy beside her nudged her shoulder.

"What's it going to be like?" he asked. The sound of the Polish language brought on a sudden onslaught of homesickness, but Zoshia considered his question.

"I don't know. My aunt and uncle went to America for work. They said it would change their fortune. They are waiting for me."

"You here by yourself?" Zoshia studied him for a moment; how would he use the information? A lady with a sick infant sat beside him, curled over the child. Zoshia relaxed.

"Yes, I'm going to work. Poland is not safe anymore, you know." Zoshia realized she sounded important though she really did not understand what was going on any more than any of the other youths joining the workforce in a new world.

"Yeah. Father and Mother and me got out while we could." Now he sounded important, then his voice deflated. "We don't know if baby sister is going to live." He looked over his shoulder. He looked back scanning her supplies.

"You got any food?" Zoshia nudged closer to her wicker trunk.

"No. Ran out."

"Us too. I'm hungry."

Zoshia closed her eyes tired of the conversation. She was hungry too, but didn't want to think about it. She was tired much of the time now. And as much as missing her family, she missed the daylight that held all possibilities. Her clothes were gritty with sweat, seasickness, and another byproduct of food she did well not to think about. With her hair knotted at the back of her head she had nothing to anchor her to a reality beyond a dark hovel adrift.

Zoshia awoke with a jump. She didn't know what had happened, but something was different. Tensed and alert she snapped her head about. People were moving, moving and ... leaving. She saw a patch of light and uneven plank boards ascending into the world. Another thump like the one that had shaken her awake made her grab on to her trunk. They must be at a port. Zoshia nearly cried with overwhelming emotion and fear caught at her again. She slowly rose to her feet moving like an old woman; there had been far too little space to stretch before. Her mind raced trying to remember the few American words she had picked up on the way over. She had listened to men and women practicing with what had to be words sent in letters from family already established. She did not like the way the American sounded or felt on her tongue, but she only knew two words of proper American. She was not as strong as her father, but Zoshia struggled her trunk into line and felt all around her the surging mass ready to breathe fresh air and live again.

With the light visible in front of them and a whiff of a breeze making its way even into their darkness, the wait was excruciating. Zoshia felt the need to relieve herself, but refused to give up her place in line. She would not be the last to see America.

By the time it was her to turn to climb from the darkness, Zoshia's legs were asleep, but she took those stairs with as much enthusiasm as she could muster. This was going to be her new life.

The intimacy of fresh air was almost like a drug. Zoshia giggled uncontrollably for a few seconds before she was struck by the immensity of the structure before her and the stern men waiting for her to step forward. The sky was full of gray-silver clouds and yet the warmth of sunlight and the joy of being outside transformed the neutral day into an event. And then the enormity of the situation hit Zoshia. She stepped forward, her precious trunk hugged to her slightly trembling frame. The first of the two men held a list of names. He waited for her to speak and Zoshia released the breath she had been suffocating and forced her mouth to form the words she had been practicing.

"Poland. Zoshia Kielbasa. Fourteen." When the men made no immediate response she repeated her words apologetically. Her American must be really bad she thought self-consciously. The man with his wild hair tucked under a strange hat with a funny brim and dirty-kneed pants scanned the list in his hand. Zoshia started her third recitation when he held up his hand and looked at her kindly for the first time. With a slight smile on sun beaten lips he pointed to the next man who stood on the dock watching passengers place their feet on American-made construction for the first time. From the way the man scowled intently on each immigrating immigrant stopping some for closer inspection of tongues or eyes, Zoshia assumed he was a doctor.

Her skin crawled and she wondered if she was coming down with something, the way she felt every time she was scrutinized. She shivered as she remembered the rats crawling across her feet as she slept; what if she were sick and never made it to her Aunt Helen? She had heard stories of people who were held for months with sickness. But the man, after a cursory glance, not letting her finish her rehearsed American, waved her forward and she followed the mass of thickly dressed anxious looking people. The doctor held his dirty piece of chalk before him like a shield as more people emerged from the ship. His mark would determine their fate. No one wanted a white mark that would send her or him to further examination.

Zoshia, with her group of people, was heading for a building that seemed to belong on post cards but not in real life. It looked like a palace with three towers sticking up and red building blocks holding it together. It looked important. A little girl in front of Zoshia began to cry and would not be silenced until her Papa picked her up, though he was already laden with the family's worldly possessions. Zoshia took deep breaths of air to calm her stomach and to take advantage of the freshness that tasted like candy after days without. She did not want to go inside away from the cloud formations, the sunlight, and air circulation. The palatial structure would end Poland she knew, and Zoshia was not quite ready to let go, even after the undeterminable time on the ocean. The crowd of fortune-seekers pushed her forward like the ever moving arms of time and she took one more gulp of American air before stepping into the dim of the building.

The noise was deafening. In the onslaught of shuffling feet, crying children, and exclamations of frustration and joy in so many languages, Zoshia was frozen. A shove from behind set things right and she was able to take in more of her surroundings. The great room was separated into many little sections with benches and partitions. People were flooding in ever direction and, if there were any organization governing the movement, Zoshia didn't recognize it. At the center of it all was a grand American flag hanging on a hard red wall. It was so large its material would have provided clothing for every member of her family. She felt a pang of shock and loss at this thought, but was soon swept up into the flurry. Her life changing with each step, she had a hard time sorting out exactly how it all happened. A man had approached her when she had remained standing like an island in the flow of people. He had babbled at her rapidly in American. She looked at him sadly.

"Poland. Zoshia Kielbasa. Fourteen."

He shook his head at her with an exaggerated sigh and waved down another man several sections away. The new man approached looking annoyed. After a few moments of exchanged explanations, the man spoke to her. A wave of relief flushed her when Zoshia heard the language of her land.

"You need to keep moving. Follow these people through the second door to the showers. You must be cleaned, then you will answer some questions, go to a general meeting and, if all goes well, be released to wherever you're going in about three hours. Good luck."

Though he even forced a smile for her, the man would answer no more of her questions except to insist she leave her trunk at a designated area while she washed. She finally relented when she was informed that without the cleansing she would never leave this building.

The water was lukewarm and the disinfectant burned her nose, but Zoshia felt more human when she emerged from the cleaning room. Her relaxation would only last momentarily. Her wicker trunk that contained her dowry and the few cherished possessions from her home was gone. She searched again and again and was reduced to tears and angry words in Polish which only granted her stares from those passing by. After an eternity of draining emotion, a worker took pity on her and approached. He glanced at the baggage and, finding none of the description, advised that she continue on her way. He told her if the trunk was gone now, it would not reappear. It would be best to move on. Zoshia stumbled forward afraid to stop, to lose herself in the crowd. She was directed to a question station where she was quizzed repeatedly about her intentions in the United States. Fortunately, the questions were supplied in her language. They were the same question her father had answered on the form sending her to America. Her frustration flared. Her trunk had been stolen and she had already answered all of these questions. After repeating her name seven times to the American lady who was taking notes for the Polish-speaking questioner, the secretary got frustrated. Her interpreter sighed when he looked back at Zoshia after taking a moment of hand-waving, forest-fire American.

"She says your name is Sophie." Zoshia looked at him with dismay. She couldn't even pronounce her own name.

After the questioning and a meeting, one spoken in American so Zoshia was certain few had understood any of it, she was directed to a pen. She would have felt more than a little disgusted about being assigned to a pen like a goat, if she weren't so exhausted. She sat on the floor in the Polish pen. The scratched benches were bolted to the floor and filled with squirming children and a few adults lamenting over loved ones being held in the infirmary or being deported back to the home land.

Zoshia's trunk was gone, the wicker magic stolen as she had washed the travel grim away. In her mind she saw it and concentrated on the calm and optimism she had once felt as she sat on the floor in her parents' room. She would have new dreams to focus on now. She ticked the ingredients off for Gwumki in her mind and her stomach growled. She stuck her hand in her worn pocket in hopes of a few crumbs from long-devoured bread. Her fingers brushed her mother's golden bead and Zoshia felt the immensity of being a woman in a new world. The image of her mother, on Zoshia's last day in Poland, rustling around in the pair of decorative sheets that the family never used filled her mind. When her mother rose and stretched her back she had a wad of dirty hankies proudly held before her, yet she seemed more strained than usual.

"I know you don't understand now, but this is for you, the baby of our family."

When Zoshia hesitantly unraveled the wad, a single golden bead lay in the center of her palm. It was beautiful.

"It was on a necklace my father gave my mother when they were married." For a moment Mama looked young again. "She always wore it on special occasions. When I was a baby I tugged on the sparkly strands and the necklace broke. So many of the pieces were lost it was never remade. My mother was so angry about her necklace, but I was so young I only giggled. She saved this bead for years. I can still see her holding it up to the light as if it held the answers. When I became a woman, my mother gave it to me."

She forced back the tears and vowed to herself that she would make her mother proud. She would work hard. Zoshia glanced up as a family leaped from the bench to rejoice with friends there to take them away from the Polish pen and make them Americans. When the insistent Americans had sent her here, having finally determined that she was Zoshia Kielbasa, or rather Sophie Kay, that she wasn't sick and that she was indeed just fourteen, they had called this the kissing post. Watching her Polish comrades she realized why, even from within her haze. Before she could move another family had settled their load on the paint-less bench to wait their turn. Her eyes fell upon a Polish sentence written in red paint on the wall next to a tiny flag that represented her culture. The words read:

Welcome to America

Zoshia stretched, squeezing her bead more tightly within the safety of her palm. Aunt Helen had not yet arrived bringing the future with her like the first gust before a storm. Zoshia knew that she would come.

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